Service Convenience: On-Line versus Brick and Mortar Bookstores

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ABSTRACT

In this research, the authors assess the applicability of the SERVCON model to the e-commerce (e-service) environment in the context of student textbook purchases. Following a literature review, a survey was developed based on previous scales; items were modified to fit the e-commerce environment. The survey was administered to college students in business courses, and 281 usable responses were received. Factor analysis resulted in several items being dropped, but the six factor SERVCON model was validated in the online environment. The validated model was used to compare service convenience perceptions between students purchasing books online and students purchasing books by traditional methods (brick-and-mortar). The service convenience measures for online purchases than brick-and-mortar purchases for decision, access, benefit, transaction, and postbenefit convenience. The study validates the SERVCON model in the e-service environment, and extends work that explains consumer behavior in e-services. Traditional bookstores need to explore options to improve services in the brick-and-mortar environment. Online vendors can improve their web sites to provide better service convenience to their customers.

Keywords: E-commerce, E-service, Electronic Retailing, Retailing, SERVCON, Service Convenience, Textbook Purchasing

INTRODUCTION

We live in a time when many customers seek convenience. One could simply explain convenience as something that saves customers time and effort. Copeland (1923) is credited with introducing the concept of convenience. However convenience seemed to remain a one-dimensional construct in most people’s minds. Recent research has criticized one-dimensional definitions of convenience as insufficient. Yale and Venkatesh (1986) explored the concept of convenience and suggested six dimensions to convenience, but empirical testing of the model found the dimensions overlapped. Gehrt and Yale (1993) conducted a study that found the concept of convenience included temporal, spatial, and effort dimensions. Seiders, Berry, and Gresham (2000) also advocated for a multidimensional view of convenience.

Berry, Seiders, and Grewal (2002) developed a conceptual model of service con-
venience (SERVCON) which defines service convenience as customers’ “time and effort perceptions related to buying or using a service” (p. 4), and describe it as a multidimensional construct. Chang, Polonsky, and Junek (2007) looked at service convenience related to health club membership and found that the dimensions were valid and reliable in that context. Colwell et al. (2008) developed and validated scales to measure service convenience in the context of personal cellular telephone and Internet usage. Bianchi (2009) investigated customers’ expectations of convenience related to convenience stores in Chile. Clulow and Reimers (2009) looked at factors related to retail center convenience among Australian consumers. Researchers examining e-service have tended to disregard the robustness of validated service convenience models. Researchers have added new dimensions rather than testing the existing model against e-service data. This research study examines whether it is appropriate to apply the service convenience model validated for brick and mortar retailing to e-service.

Several researchers have examined factors that relate to online sales (Ranganathan & Gradon, 2002; Udo & Marquis, 2002). However those studies looked at characteristics of the websites rather than purchase convenience. Dillon and Reif (2004) examined characteristics of the product, shopping experience, customer service, and consumer risk in young adults’ purchases of textbooks online. Zhang and Prybutok (2005) added to research on online shopping, and found that dimensions of convenience were related to e-service quality in evaluating online shopping. More recently, Jiang, Yang and Jun (2013) specifically looked at service convenience in online environments. Unfortunately, they reject the usefulness of the SERVCON model in this environment without testing it for online shopping. Instead, they construct and test an alternative model. Lai, Ulhas & Lin (2014) proposed a modified SERVCON model labeled EC-SERVCON which does examine the elements of service convenience for e-retailing. The study focuses on the service elements associated with the purchase of products online. The authors use a perceptions-minus-expectations gap approach to modify the SERVCON model and then validate their modified model for the e-retail shopping experience. Our study examines convenience in the context of textbook purchasing using the SERVCON model in both the traditional and online purchasing experience. In this environment, service is paramount and the product is a commodity item (textbook needed for a class).

Textbook Acquisition

The number of people enrolled at U.S. colleges or universities has grown dramatically in the last decade. There has been corresponding growth in college bookstore textbook sales over that same period from $8.6 billion in 2003 to $10.45 billion in 2012 (NACS, 2013). Historically, college students have obtained their textbooks by going to the campus bookstore, searching aisles crowded with fellow students to find their required books, then standing in long lines to complete the purchase. Students at larger universities might have multiple bookstores from which to choose their books. While that option is still available today, there are many other ways students can obtain their books. Some campus bookstores offer students the opportunity to place an order through a web site; then they can simply go to the bookstore, pick up, and pay for the books at a designated time. Bookstore employees have done the tedious tasks of finding and packaging the books. Some stores even have online payment, so students have only to pick up the books. Students can also purchase books online from other suppliers. Many students go to Amazon.com or Half.com, search the inventory for their books, put them in a virtual shopping cart, pay for them, and have them delivered right to their dorm room. Another option, both online and in many bookstores, is to rent books for the semester. Renting can reduce book costs and also solve the problem of buybacks at the end of the semester.

The competitive environment of the college textbook market is much more dynamic at this time than it has ever been in the past.
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